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A COMPARISON OF THE BALKAN SITUATION 1918 AND 1943

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Description

A comparison of the military position in the Balkans of the Central Powers in 1918 and that of the Germans today, showing that the present German position appears stronger than that of 1918, but that Bulgarian morale, now as then, may prove a decisive factor in their defeat.

December 10, 1943

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SUMMARY

The 1918 position of the Central Powers in the Balkans, though apparently strong, was actually insecure, because of the German manpower shortage and Bulgarian war-weariness, brought to a head by Allied political warfare centered around the fourteen points. The breakthrough scored by the Allies, which led directly to the collapse of the Central Powers, can be attributed to these factors. The 1943 German position is dissimilar in most respects: the increased importance of airpower and of airdromes, and the absence of a land front, the greater number of troops at Germany's disposal, the difficulties created for the Germans by the large scale guerrilla opposition, and the network of modern fortifications in depth, all change the picture. Bulgarian morale, however, is still a vulnerable point, though today Bulgarian affection for Russia, anxiety to stay out of a shooting war, and fear of aerial bombardment, are the forces operating in favor of the Allies. A collapse might once more be induced by a well-managed campaign of psychological warfare.

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A Comparison of the Balkan Situation in 1918 and in 1943.

1918: On the eve of the Allied Balkan offensive of 1918, which led directly to the collapse of the Central Powers in the West, 17 Bulgarian and 2 Turkish divisions, stiffened by a few German MG battalions and batteries, not totalling over one division, faced 31 Allied divisions on the Salonika front. The Adriatic flank was patrolled by the Austro-Hungarian Navy and important fortified coastal towns were held by relatively small Austro-Hungarian garrisons. There was no threat from Russia. Serbia, Montenegro, and Rumania, the only enemy territories, were effectively pacified, and there was no guerrilla opposition of any importance. At least 8 Bulgarian Divisions and some German units were located in the areas behind the front. Outside of second rate troops for occupation purposes in Russia and the Ukraine, the Central Powers had no military commitments, except in Italy and on the Western Front.

German control in the Balkans was exercised primarily through General Von Mackensen, Commander in Chief for the Balkans. Under him was a split command, with General Von Scholtz commanding the German units and the First Bulgarian Army, while the Second Bulgarian Army was under General Zhekov, Bulgarian Commander in Chief.

The strategic position of the Central Powers appeared excellent. There was no serious threat of Allied Landings on the Dalmatian coast, because of the lack at that time of modern amphibious air-supported landing techniques, and all forces could be concentrated on the Salonika Front, where natural defense lines tended to outbalance the Allied numerical superiority and slight preponderance in artillery. Air power had no great significance. The apparent security of this position was, however, deceptive. The position of the Germans with respect to combat manpower was in fact very tight. Replacements were not available to deal adequately with an emergency.

When the Allies launched an offensive on 2 September 1918, calculated to gain certain local tactical advantages, a complete breakthrough was achieved, and an armistice stipulating unconditional surrender of the Bulgarian armies was concluded on 29 September.

Bulgaria turned out to be the weakest link in the German defense system, partly because the Germans were unable to spare any reserves to restore the position. The Bulgarian collapse was not entirely due, however, to local military circumstances, but at least in part to the consternation in Bulgaria which

followed the German defeats in France, and to general war weariness, brought to a head by Allied propaganda centered around Wilson's 14 points.

On the battlefront there was dissatisfaction with the German soldiers and the German Command. The Bulgarian officers did not relish the split command, nor the German methods of directing operations. The Bulgarian soldiers were alienated by German arrogance and the summary way in which the Germans requisitioned meager Bulgarian food supplies. Furthermore, the Allies had been dumping on the front lines large numbers of leaflets containing the 14 Points. These leaflets appeared to guarantee everything the Bulgars had been fighting for.

After weak resistance (from 2 until 15 September), the Bulgarian soldiers retreated, ceased to fight, and declared their intention of going home to gather in the harvest. They did not turn on the Germans. Morale, and not Allied superiority in personnel or equipment, was in large measure the cause of the Bulgarian collapse. The German and Bulgarian supply systems did not break down; neither did the generalship.

The morale conditions that affected the Bulgarian armies

existed also on the home front. The Liberal Party government which had played the game of Tsar Ferdinand and Berlin, and had maneuvered the country into war, was replaced in June, 1918 by a cabinet of Democrats and Agrarians headed by Alexander Malinov. Since both Democrats and Agrarians had opposed the pro-German policy of Ferdinand, this worried the Germans, and gave Allied diplomacy and propaganda opportunity to work on the Bulgarian people. The influence of the United States, which had never declared war on Bulgaria, and still maintained diplomatic representatives in Sofia, was exerted with skill.

Then, as today, the war was being fought in the name of Greater Bulgaria. The Communists and Agrarians formed the strongest opposition to the war policy of the government, and a number of bourgeois party leaders were willing to support them. The peasants were being exploited by the Germans, and many city-dwellers were getting rich on war profits.

The most serious morale factor was war-weariness. Bulgaria had been at war for six years, with brief interruptions; and the last three years had consisted largely of position war. This was very wearing on the Bulgarian soldier, who is deeply attached to the soil. Those outside influences on morale which are most important today were not significant then;

namely, the attachment for Russia (then in the throes of revolution) and the fear of bombing.

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1943: From a military point of view there is little obvious similarity between the situation in the Balkans in 1918 and today. Airpower, and the absence of a land front, have moved the center of activity from the Saloniks area to a number of concentration points throughout the peninsula. The Adriatic flank is menaced by a possible seaborne invasion from Italy; mainland Greece and the islands are threatened from Africa; Turkey is a doubtful neutral; and Russia is within striking distance of Rumania and the Black Sea coast.

Whereas less than 30 divisions, mostly Bulgarian, were sufficient to occupy the Balkans and conduct offensive action against a large and well established Allied army in 1918, today Germany disposes of a total of over 65 divisions for operations in the Balkans. Of these some 20 to 25 are German and Austrian, 25 are Bulgarian, 10 Hungarian, and 5 Rumanian. (The last two countries have obligations on the Russian front which at present tie up another 15 or 20 divisions, but both are seeking to recall these troops.) Germany also has at her disposal small Croatian and Serbian forces. The distribution of the Axis forces is as follows: 7 German and 5 Bulgarian

divisions in Greece; the equivalent of 13 German divisions and 7 Bulgarian divisions in Yugoslavia; 2 German divisions in Albania. Bulgaria has about 11 of her own divisions and the equivalent of at most 2 German divisions. Hungary has 7 divisions on the Serb and Croat frontiers. Rumania's divisions are held mostly in reserve against a Russian breakthrough or a landing on the Black Sea coast. The overall and much of the area command is under German generals. Except for Hungary, all armies are under split commands. Six or eight Rumanian and Hungarian divisions are temporarily immobilized, through mutual distrust, on the Transylvanian frontier.

There still remain at least 43 divisions devoted solely to the defense of the Balkan Peninsula against an Allied invasion. The military strength of these forces is an unknown quantity. The German and Austrian divisions are mostly such in name only. They are composed of as few as 20 or 30 percent Germans while the rest are Croats, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Dutch, and even White Russians and Cossacks. Smaller German units are chiefly technical or anti-aircraft personnel, either over or under aged. The Bulgarian divisions are well trained for Balkan fighting but they are not battle-tested. Little of the military equipment used by the Axis forces in the Balkans

at present is of the highest quality. Bulgarian armaments, for instance, consist largely of captured Czech, Belgian, French, and Dutch equipment, old model planes, and rebuilt and out-dated tanks and guns.

The strategic position of the Axis today would at first glance appear weaker than that of the Central Powers in 1918 because the Germans can not concentrate their forces on a short front, as at Salonika, without fear of being outflanked by a seaborne invasion. Moreover, the difficulties created by large-scale guerrilla warfare are formidable. These apparent weaknesses, however, seem to be more than counterbalanced by the elaborate network of modern fortifications in depth (on terrain highly advantageous to the defender) that have been built at all likely invasion points, by the network of large airdromes, and by temporary local aerial superiority. The first line of defense in almost every instance is occupied by German troops, with the satellite armies held in reserve, for use in covering any German retreat. The lines of communication from the central dispersal areas to any possible front are well prepared and guarded.

The German military situation in the Balkans must therefore on balance be said to be better than in 1918. The vulnerable point today, as in 1918, is morale, and particularly Bulgarian morale. A new element of German weakness consists in the

fanatical support which the enslaved Yugoslav and Greek population will give the Allies in the event of a landing.

The morale situation in Bulgaria is important today because, though there are many more German troops in the Balkans in 1943 than there were in 1918, the largest and strongest unit is still the Bulgarian Army. Should Bulgaria collapse suddenly, or turn against Germany, Hitler's position in the Balkans might soon become untenable. There appears to be a good possibility of such a collapse. Though the morale factors involved are different from those in 1918, the are nevertheless just as powerful.

The most compelling influence in contemporary Bulgaria is the attachment to Russia. This attachment has historical and cultural roots, and is strengthened by Russia's military performance. The fact that Russia was allied to Germany in March 1941, was undoubtedly an important factor in the original Bulgarian decision to join the Axis. Bulgaria still maintains diplomatic relations with Russia and has refused to send troops to the Russian front. The communists in Bulgaria have so far been the only determined resistance group in the country, and have won the support of many other political groups, particularly among the peasants. Bulgarians hope that Russia will protect them against a severe peace treaty.

A second morale factor is the desire of the people to keep their country out of the shooting war. This feeling was strong from the very beginning and appeared to be the basis of Bulgarian policy even before it became apparent that Germany would lose the war. The only way that Bulgaria has been kept faithful to the Axis has been by cloaking all Bulgarian military activity in support of Germany under the fiction that it constituted "defense of the legal frontiers of United Bulgaria."

A third morale factor, closely connected with the second, is the fear of aerial bombing which has gripped the urban population. This fear is converted to anger at the Germans whenever Bulgaria is bombed.

Operating against these factors, favorable to Allied psychological propaganda, is the fear existing in all classes that the Allies will allow Bulgaria to be partitioned, and that Greek or Yugoslavia troops will be used as occupation forces. Furthermore, German control over the Regency and the Government is such that defection from that quarter seems improbable. The morale of the army is relatively high, and it might fight well in a defensive war. The Bulgarian soldiers are not keen about their occupation duties and the old factors of German arrogance and the "split command" frictions are present.

It may reasonably be concluded that a diplomatic and

psychological warfare campaign based on a study of all morale factors, coinciding with a Russian breakthrough toward Bessarabia or an Allied landing in force, might easily result in a collapse as complete as that of 1918.